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S-399390 : Challenging the museum with Sarah Oppenheimer

Maurer, Jacqueline

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ARCHITECTURE/MACHINE

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Why is it that architecture has continually been imagined, defined, or designed as a machine? Does this refer to an actual building — its structure and construction — or solely to its technical components? Might it even refer to its use? Could it then be taken to include its users? Are they too a part of the machine? If so, do they control the machine, or does the machine control them? Which kinds of machine do these concepts refer to? How have they and their relationship with architecture changed over time? And when did all of this begin? More fundamentally: Are the concept of the machine and its history still of relevance to architecture today?

gta papers

ARCHITECTURE/MACHINE
Programs, Processes, and Performances

Moritz Gleich and Laurent Stalder (eds.)

gta Verlag

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S — 399390: Challenging the Museum with Sarah Oppenheimer Jacqueline Maurer

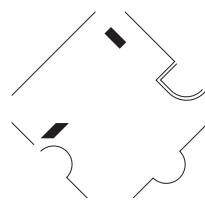
In the Grand Hall of the Musée d'Art Moderne (Mudam) on the Kirchberg in Luxemburg: depending on the weather and the time of day, grids composed of trapezoids, parallelograms, and rectangles cast shadows of varying intensity on the honey-colored limestone walls and floors. It was in this location roofed by a geometrically latticed glass pyramid, and in light of the wider exhibition context, that the US-American artist Sarah Oppenheimer staged an operation in winter and spring 2016. In this work Oppenheimer departed from the motif she had pursued since 2002 in *Typology of Holes*: her piercing of museum walls with openings, a procedure based on the contingencies of the spatial matrix or, to use the artist's own term for these, "the array." Instead, at the invitation of Mudam, two walkable and movable spatial elements — so-called "switches" — were created for the Grand Hall. As with her previous work, this new category of spatial manipulation bears an alphanumeric title: "S" stands for "switch" while the subsequent series of digits is generated from the type and composition both of the space housing the exhibit and the rooms adjacent to it.

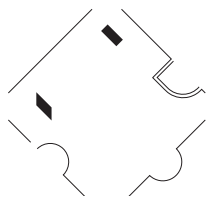
S-399390 is based on two primary grid systems in Mudam: the building structure and the planimetric organization of the building. The ground plan of the expansive museum, opened in 2006 and designed

by the Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei, engages with the arrowhead plan of the eighteenth-century Fort Thüngen, thereby responding abstractly to the historical context of the site. The spatial axes already shift repeatedly, by 45 or 90 degrees, before visitors reach the main hall via a ramp and the reception area. Mudam's Grand Hall — the central point of orientation in the museum, and simultaneously an imposing space in which to linger and to exhibit — has been rotated 45 degrees from the primary



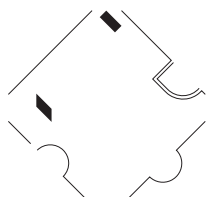
axis of procession. Visitors are accordingly able to enter and exit the Grand Hall at three of its four corners. Coming from the reception area, the first entrance to the Grand Hall is audaciously mediated: a first-floor balcony projects diagonally into the 43-meter-high hall, delaying experience of the latter's impressive height and the rotation of its axis. This is a moment of transition or a threshold. The balcony is skewed 45 degrees above the hall's square-shaped ground plan. Extending over two stories the walls are clad with Magny Doré limestone, pierced with crystalline, triangular, or vertical skylight openings, the last of these dissolving entire walls. The Grand Hall is topped by a towering, stepped glass pyramid that echoes — like the limestone — Pei's design for the





Louvre, but is crowned in this case by a glazed lantern. The fenestration connects the interior and the exterior, establishing precisely selected references to the architectural and landscape surroundings while simultaneously exposing the space to the shifting natural light of the sky.

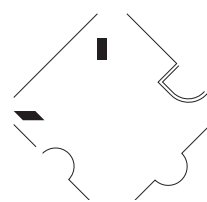
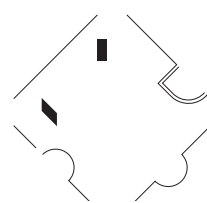
In February 2016 Oppenheimer placed within this given architectural constellation two glazed walkways as spatial thresholds that formally correspond to the order of Pei's building. One of these "switches" has a transverse-rectangular base and a parallelogram as its counterpart ceiling profile; its companion's elements are arranged in exact reverse. Mirroring the dark coloration of the glazing framework, the dimensions of the profiles of the floor and ceiling panels are reminiscent of H-beams. Nevertheless, an impression of lightness is created, deriving from the large lateral glass walls, whereby one from each consists of a transverse rectangle and its opposite of a parallelogram. By means of the

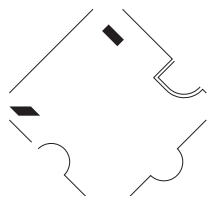


oblique walls on one of their sides the "switches" take on a rotational impulse and a directional momentum. They invoke the various grid arrangements both inherent to and produced by the architecture of the Grand Hall while simultaneously challenging them. Furthermore, the "switches" react to the existing and the newly staged threshold areas. There is a visual ambiguity about where the rooms extending from the hall, the steps

to the upper story, and the spiral staircase to the basement actually lead. For the duration of the exhibition, the “switches” were relocated twice a week within the transitional verges of these spaces — or, in their own terminology, were “switched over” — and they thereby intervened in the existing threshold situations, highlighting, redirecting, transforming, and multiplying them.

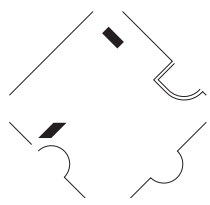
Oppenheimer always aims to heighten the spatiotemporal perception of the spaces in which her interventions are staged. To this end, she investigates the way the existing spaces are visited and used by different publics, and the way in which the location influences the movement both of visitors and internal and external employees. In S-399390 the artist explores how the positions of the “switches” — which themselves contain a threshold effect — affect the succession of thresholds in the museum, as well as the direct routes that visitors so often seek to take. The precise design, principally consisting of glass, aluminum, and plywood, coupled with these varying positions, is the result of an elaborate preparation process that is a general hallmark of the artist’s work. The system involved is by no means simply a negotiation of the formal architectural circumstances; rather, it consists to a far greater extent in tracing the unnoticed codifications of the respective exhibition locations in order to make them perceptible. Oppenheimer





examines the various prevailing circumstances: the architectural conventions, the industrial and material norms, as well as the ideological implications to which exhibition establishments are subject. The groundwork includes studying the museum plans, researching visitor behavior on site, and above all conducting exchanges with the different staff groups, in a process of communication about utilization.

Sarah Oppenheimer understands architecture explicitly as a machine. Her oeuvre draws attention to the performativity of exhibition locations, which per se determine a very specific and highly disciplining use, and thus harbor a latent ideological statement. The "existing architecture" as formed and controlled by the visitors is factored in while the visitors themselves are activated by the artistic operation, induced to see. The overall spatial impression was constantly



transformed by the reflections of Mudam's architecture and the visitors in the shifting seasonal daylight on the at times transparent and at times opaque appearance of the successively layered glass surfaces. Amplified by their calculated repositioning, the elaborately conceived "switches" perpetually generated and mediated new spatial configurations.

An element in Oppenheimer's conceptual logic is that the work can be relocated and recalibrated according to varying spatial scales. Because the ground plans of all the exhibition spaces in Mudam

have the same order, "the array" remains in itself the same, enabling the work to be modified. The "switches" could be dismantled after the exhibition and can be reassembled for a new presentation with new parameters.

f.1 Sarah Oppenheimer, S-399390, 2016. Glass, metal, wood, and existing architecture. Variable dimensions.

Art intervention at the Grand Hall of Mudam Luxemburg (February 2 to May 29, 2016). Photography by Serge Hasenboehler.

f.2 Changing positions of the "switches" during the exhibition at Mudam. Diagrams by Sarah Oppenheimer.

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